

Jason, I Hardly Knew Ye

by Syl

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Summary: Dick Grayson has a conversation with the brother he never knew.

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The jagged lightning exploded across the gloomy sky, revealing the dark-haired young man. He moved stoically through the cold, driving rain, his overcoat collar turned up against the relentless downpour. A second flash of lightning momentarily exposed the neat rows of headstones that lined the graveled path where he walked.

Unmindful of the spreading puddles before and around him, the somber form continued on his way.

"Row fifty, column twenty," he muttered. "Twenty more rows." He could feel his toes sloshing inside his sodden shoes. "Alfred's gonna kill me," he said ruefully. Then mimicked, "Master Dick, well-dressed young men do not stroll in the rain without their coats and galoshes!"

Dick grinned. "Well, I remembered my coat, anyway, Alfred. Sorry." He walked a few more yards, then took stock of his location once again. "Sixty-eight, sixty-nine...seventy." Dick stopped. He couldn't make his legs go any farther; he felt himself inexplicably frozen in place.

"Come on, Grayson," he berated. "Get a grip! You missed the funeral...this is the least you can do." For Jay. For Bruce.

For himself.

Taking out a miniature flashlight, Dick aimed the beam at the headstone directly in front of him. The inscription read: Jason Todd Wayne. Beloved Son.

"Beloved son," Dick whispered, killing the flashlight. He swallowed in the sudden darkness. "Beloved son," he repeated a little louder. "I guess that makes you my 'beloved brother', Jay," Dick said with a short, sardonic laugh. "'Beloved brother','" he repeated, harshly.

Turning his face heavenward, Dick held his arms up, and shouted, his inner turmoil mirroring the fury of the nor'easter that was currently pounding Gotham City. "Then why do I feel like I *hate* you so much!? Why do I feel like you took what belonged to *me*? What was rightfully mine? You were my brother, and I didn't even *know* you!"

Dick felt the icy rain streaming down his upturned face, mixing with his unchecked tears, and then trickling treacherously down his collar. He slowly bowed his head, looking down at the offending memorial.

"Why couldn't we have been friends? We both loved him. We should've been friends you 'n me. *I* should've trained you to be Robin. But I wasn't invited. I was FIRED, remember? I guess Bruce just didn't have enough room for two Robins in his heart." Dick flailed his fist at the heavens.

"But *I* was Robin! Robin was MY name! My MOTHER gave me that name. Bruce had no right...he had NO RIGHT to give it to you without my permission. DO YOU HEAR ME, JASON! He had NO RIGHT!" Dick brought his fist down to his side, then repeated in a soft whisper, "He had no right."

Dick stood, his head bowed for a long moment.

"When I met you that one time, Jay...remember the drug bust?" Dick smiled at the treasured memory. "When you screwed up the bust that first night, I wanted to take you over my knee and spank you. What a loser, I thought. Batman fires *me* and then replaces me with a pimply *kid* who can't find his way out of a paper bag?" Dick chuckled.

"I *wanted* to hate you, Jay. Oh, boy, did I ever...I was so *damned* pleased that you'd ruined that drug bust. HA! Batman might've found a Robin lookalike, but he sure hadn't replaced me with a Robin 'act-alike'!" Dick's smile faltered momentarily.

"I remember the look on your face. First, when I came in and pulled your butt out of harm's way, then when I told you that I was gonna tell Bruce about how it went down. Kinda like the look I gave Commissioner Gordon the first time I screwed up a solo job, and he threatened to report it to Batman." Dick sighed. "Your hurt look made me feel like such a jerk. I should've been offering you tips on how to improve your stealth skills, but instead I was threatening to go tattling to 'Dad'...Who was the *real* loser, that time?"

Dick shook his head.

"You weren't there the next morning..." Dick chuckled again. "...You were little more than a wet-nosed kid, so I guess you were probably in school."

Dick's grin broadened. He waved his arms and began pacing excitedly, getting into the spirit of shared memories that only a sibling could understand.

"Bruce must've reamed into you, Jay, before I arrived at the Cave," Dick laughed, the role of the older brother taunting the younger falling easily on his shoulders. "What were you doing out so late on a school night anyway? The one ironclad rule Bruce had when I was growing up was: No Crime Fighting on School Nights!"

Dick walked up to the headstone, and looking around, he bent down and covered his mouth as if passing on a deep secret. He could almost *feel* Jay's presence at the moment. "Don't tell Bruce, but...well, just between you 'n me, kid, I snuck out a couple times myself. Oh, okay...I snuck out more than a few times." Dick held his hands out and gave a helpless shrug.

"What could I do? I mean, I had this *great* balcony right outside my room...and that huge oak tree just a few feet away *begged* me to jump...But then, you knew about that, didn't you? Bruce caught me once, and--Well, I don't have to tell *you* what happened afterwards." Dick smiled appreciatively at the shared experience. "We had a lot in common, kid. I wish..."

Dick paused, staring pensively at the silent monument before him. He drew in a lungful of cold, damp air. His throat protested, and Dick gave a short raspy cough.

"Getting back to me snitching to the Big Guy that next morning." Dick gave a short, bitter laugh. "In case you were worried about what was said...well, turns out you didn't have anything to worry about, kid. Bruce wouldn't talk to me. After all he and I had been through together, he wouldn't even give me the time of day." Dick grinned, then added wryly, "But you know Bruce...so warm, so approachable. Heh." Dick rolled his eyes then.

"Oh, Bruce said that he adopted you and trained you because he felt that a kid like you--'A troubled young man with a lot of strikes against him'--needed an outlet for his 'deep-seated anger'." Dick grinned wryly.

"Yeah, I know. The usual bull. He said basically the same thing to Clark about me. Clark couldn't understand why a loner like Bruce would take a 'child'--God, how I HATE that word!--as his partner."

Dick's mind went back to that overheard conversation. He'd been with Bruce a few months and had only recently debuted as Robin. Still unsure about his place in his guardian's heart, Dick had been devastated by Bruce's response...

"My reasons for training Dick are my own, Clark. Don't interfere in what is none of your business," Bruce's cold voice rang clearly through the study's thick oak door.

"I'm afraid that it **is** my business, Bruce," Clark replied quietly. "You're risking the life of a child. I'm afraid that I can't just sit back and ignore it. I don't care if you **are** Dick's legal guardian." Clark's voice dropped momentarily, then came back stronger. "Dick's a great kid, Bruce. Why don't you just let him be a boy? It's obvious how much he worships you. And how much you love him--"

"Clark, I'm not Dick's parent," Bruce interrupted, dismissively. "I'm his mentor...his teacher. Dick needed an outlet for his anger and his need for revenge. Do you understand what I'm saying, Clark? Dick's only nine, but he was already being driven by revenge. I couldn't stand back and allow the boy's thirst for vengeance to get himself killed..."

But the nine-year-old Dick had stopped listening. "God, how I hurt over those words. Bruce said that he wasn't my 'parent'. In other words, he wasn't my 'father'...Jay, you just don't know how much I wanted Bruce to be my father. I loved him as much as I'd ever loved my Mom and Dad. And I thought he loved me, too. But Bruce told me from the start...and now he'd told Clark...that he wouldn't be my parent. That he was only my mentor, my teacher."

Dick's shoulders slumped at the remembered hurt and feelings of rejection.

"I swore that I'd stop loving him," Dick choked out. "That I wouldn't care anymore. But I couldn't, Jay, I couldn't. Bruce was everything I'd ever loved and admired in my father, all over again and then some. I worked so hard to please him; obeyed almost every order he gave me without question. I guess I felt deep down inside that if I played the part of the good, obedient little soldier...If I trained the way he said I should, fought alongside him--" Dick grinned. "--like a 'Well-oiled machine'--I bet you heard **that** one about a zillion times, huh?--I thought that if I did all that, then Bruce would eventually love me, too."

Dick sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Dumb, huh? All my efforts got me was getting fired as Robin, after the Joker shot me. Funny, 'cause Bruce said that he couldn't be responsible for the life of a 'child' anymore!--There's that word again!" Dick smiled ruefully, shaking his head at the irony.

"So, I left. Became the Titans' full-time leader. Changed my codename to Nightwing. Robin had been fired after all...No, Robin had been killed by the Joker. He was dead and buried." Dick stopped talking, thinking back on the months that followed. "So, Jay...buddy, imagine my shock when I heard that 'Batman and Robin' were busting heads in Gotham all over again."

Dick glared at Jason's name on the headstone. "Jason Todd Wayne,

"Beloved Son," Dick repeated. "He never officially adopted me. I was never Dick Grayson Wayne. I guess I never needed to be, but there were times when I really *wanted* to be. I am who I am, Jay. Bruce never tried to turn me into someone else...Not like...not like he tried with you."

Dick uttered this last statement barely above a whisper.

"I know that now. Jay, we should've been friends. I should've done more to bridge the gap between us, but I was so blinded by jealous rage. You were the usurper. You were wearing my costume. Using my name. Sleeping in my bed. Fighting next to my partner. My mentor. My...father." Dick ran his hand across his eyes in a useless attempt to wipe off some of the endlessly falling raindrops.

"You had it all. Everything I'd ever wanted. Bruce even made it official with you. I'd thought at the time that he'd adopted you to avoid repeating the same mistakes he'd made with me." Dick paused, then said quietly, "I think that even Bruce believed that. But that wasn't the reason...that wasn't the reason at all."

Dick slowly went down on his knees, the wet ground immediately soaking through his trousers. He held his gloved hand out and gently traced each letter on the rain-soaked headstone.

"As much as I loved Bruce, I guess he loved me, too. But neither of us was willing to admit it openly to the other. I should've seen it, Jay. Your training, the Robin costume, the Robin codename. Bruce should've allowed you to pick something uniquely yours, you know. Like *I* did...He even adopted you legally when he made you his partner. But the worst of it was when he made you dye your hair black like mine...ostensibly so that 'Robin' would look the same...but--"

Dick pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes. "He was trying to reinvent me. Bruce missed me as much as I missed him. Bruce as much as said so that day I came to talk to him. No, when I *demanded* to talk to him. But I closed my heart to what he said about missing me. In the end, all we did was argue and say words that were meant to hurt. It was only later, much later, that I could recall the words he'd said..."

"I took in Jay, because I missed you, Dick..." Bruce's ragged words echoed relentlessly in Dick's tortured mind...

Dick wiped at his eyes. He didn't know why, but his vision was beginning to blur. The torrential rain was probably getting in his eyes, he thought.

"You deserved an older brother, Jay. One who'd been there, done that. I should've been that older brother for you. Oh, I know that I gave you my phone number in case you ever needed to talk to someone. Bruce isn't exactly Mister Conversationalist, I know. But you never called me, Jay, and I was too busy resenting you, and trying desperately to prove that I was my own man, to ever bother checking up on you."

Dick paused, then finally sat down on the wet, soggy ground, reclining on the headstone. He gave a loud sneeze.

"Great! Looks like I'm coming down with a cold. Where's Alfred when I'm too dumb to come in out of the rain?" Dick sneezed uncontrollably again.

"I even gave you my last Robin costume. Big deal, huh? But I remember the look you gave me, Jay. Was that the same look I used to give Bruce the few times he gave me a compliment? Was my hero worship that nakedly obvious? You were still too small to fill the costume, but I figured you'd have plenty of time to grow into it."

Dick was suddenly racked by uncontrollable mixture of sobbing and coughing.

"Oh, God! I should've phoned you, Jay. What would that have cost me? A few moments from my busy life? I didn't know you'd be gone in just a few short months. And I wasn't even on Earth when it happened. Can you ever forgive me, little brother? Bruce won't, and I don't expect him to. I know that I can't forgive myself."

Dick brought his knees up, placed his arms across his knees, and lay his head down. He allowed himself a few luxurious minutes to openly grieve for the younger brother whom he'd never known. Dick's sorrow was drowned out by the storm's thunderous roar surrounding him. It felt as if the very heavens themselves were grieving with him for his inconsolable loss.

"No, son. *I* should've called *you*."

Dick's head shot up. He felt too sick, too exhausted to take up a defensive stance. Whatever was going to happen, let it, he thought fatalistically. A sudden crack of lighting revealed the tall, dark figure before him. Bruce! Dick slowly stood up.

"How long--?" he asked, uncertainly.

"Long enough," Bruce replied, instantly offering Dick a hand up. When Dick regained his feet, Bruce took a few moments to fuss over the younger man's bedraggled condition. He straightened Dick's collar and buttoned his top button. Realizing that he was acting like Alfred, Bruce dropped his hands to his sides.

Seeing Dick's profound sorrow, Bruce reached tentatively across the years of misunderstandings between them, and placed his hand gently on his former ward's shoulder.

"I should've phoned you, son. I should've asked your permission when I started training Jay. But after you left home, I was angry. Like you, I felt hurt and betrayed. I told myself that I didn't need you. And then I tried to change Jay into you. If there's anyone who should be seeking forgiveness from Jay...and from you...and who doesn't deserve it, it's me. God knows that I can't forgive myself."

"But you didn't do anything wrong, Bruce," Dick protested. "You did whatever you did because you loved both Jay and me and wanted to protect us. Maybe you went about it the wrong way...I don't know. I'm not a father, so I can't judge you. But I know now that what you did...firing me...adopting and training Jay...was out of love. I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now." Dick looked down at his soggy shoes. "It's *my* behavior towards Jay and you that's unforgivable."

"Dick, we both made mistakes, I guess. We were both a couple of stubborn, hard-nosed crime-fighters; neither one of us would give in and make the first move towards reconciliation. I know that now." Bruce pointed at the rain soaked grave before them. "A boy lies there dead because of it. Maybe we're both to blame. And neither. Jay made his own choices, too. He had a lot of anger bottled up inside him. Maybe if he'd come to me when he was younger--like you did--I might have helped him control his demons better. As it is, I guess we'll never know."

Bruce looked down sadly at the memorial to the lost boy he'd barely gotten to know. He turned his eyes to his remaining son.

"Perhaps I *did* try to change Jay into you, Dick...but I couldn't." Bruce paused. "I couldn't because Jay was, first and foremost, himself."

Both men took a moment to reflect on the laughing, stubborn, and deeply troubled young daredevil whose fiery presence burned all too briefly in their lives.

"Beloved son," Bruce read aloud.

"And brother," added Dick.

Bruce gave Dick a half-smile. "I'll have that added to the inscription immediately." Dick's eyes reflected his surprised gratitude at the unexpected acknowledgment from Bruce.

"I think we've both lived long enough with guilt, haven't we, son?" Bruce asked.

Dick nodded solemnly.

"Then, don't you think it's time for us to come in from the cold?" Bruce's dark eyes studied Dick's. At Dick's answering nod, father and son turned and together began the long trek back.

The End

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